
Communist Party Convention

[A Michigander Perspective]

[events of Aug. 30-Sept. 7, 1919]

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The First of September saw 3 distinct conventions under way in the city of Chicago, the outcome of which has not yet been assimilated by the different elements that looked hopefully in that direction for guidance. It will be some time before those who sent delegates to "The Windy City" will be able to form a fair estimate of what transpired and why.

The Socialist Party Convention was the first to be called to order by the reactionary [Adolph] Germer, under the protection of a squad of police called in to help the old machine to remain in control.

The remnant of the "Left Wing," together with their following, soon found out the hopelessness of capturing the Socialist Party for "revolutionary socialism." Between those who were refused a seat and those delegates who found themselves confronted by a well organized "yellow machine," an understanding had to be reached. The time was short, for the Communist Convention was called for Monday morning [Sept. 1, 1919] at 10:00 am. Consequently, a hall was secured in the same building, and on Sunday night [Aug. 31] the expelled and bolting delegates, led by the doughty J. Reed and his associates, Gitlow, Wagenknecht, Katterfeld, and others, hastened to organize a new party.

The claim was set forth that the Socialist Party had been "captured" and was now transformed into the Party of Communist Socialism. A committee was elected consisting of L.E. Katterfeld, A. Wagenknecht, Ludwig Lore, Kate [Sadler] Greenhalgh, Casper Bauer, for the purpose of seeking unity as a whole with the Communist Party. On the following morning this committee met with the joint organizing committee of the Communist Party. As the convention had not yet been called to order, no decisive action could be taken in the matter by the Organization Committee

as it was a matter for the convention itself to pass upon.

With the orchestra playing, the delegates and a large crowd that had gathered singing "The Internationale," the convention that marked the official launching of the Communist Party of America got under way. Dennis E. Batt, in the name of the Organization Committee and that portion of the Left Wing Council that had finally united on the joint call, in a speech brief and well constructed, traced the development of the revolutionary elements that had split away from the Socialist Party and their progress that culminated in the organization of the Communist Party, closing his remarks by officially calling the convention to order.

Louis C. Fraina, of New York, was elected temporary chairman and delivered a speech of considerable duration, dealing at length with the development of the communist elements in Europe and the Third International. After the election of committees on Credentials, Rules of Procedure, Order of Business, and an Emergency Committee of 19, the convention adjourned to allow these committees to proceed with their work.

The convention started its first official session at 9:10 pm. Al Renner, of Detroit, was elected permanent chairman. A motion was made by I.E. Ferguson to elect a committee to confer with the committee of the Communist Labor Party Convention. This was overwhelmingly defeated. The minority on this vote, about 30, representing largely the Left Wing Council elements, withdrew from the convention and went into a caucus. On returning the members of this group holding offices resigned.

The Tuesday morning [Sept. 2, 1919] session saw further resignations. Ferguson, [Jay] Lovestone,

Fraina, [C.E.] Ruthenberg, [George] Selekovich, [John] Ballam, and [Max] Cohen resigned from Emergency Committee and Paul and Fannie Hourwich resigned as secretaries. Charles Dirba, of Minnesota, and C.A. Talbot, of Flint, were selected as secretaries, the balance of the Emergency Committee standing.

From then on the 3 distinct groups stood out sharply through most of the proceedings. The largest group of the convention was the Russian caucus group, made up of the Russian-speaking elements, including Poles, Lithuanians, Letts [Latvians], Ukrainians, and others. The Fraina-Ferguson caucus has already been referred to. The other group, generally referred to as the Michigan group, was composed of delegates from Muskegon, Grand Rapids, Grand Lodge, Jackson, Detroit, Buffalo [NY], Rochester [NY], Cleveland, Rockford, Ill., and Chicago. This group stood firm on the floor but held no caucus, as they knew what they wanted and had no need of any form of coercion.

The Russian comrades had no difficulty in controlling the convention and forcing their will on the body, as they voted *en bloc*, all important matters being decided in caucus. Fear and mistrust of the Michigan group seemed to mark the actions of the majority from the outset of the convention. Every action was carefully and skillfully worked out to test the strength of this group. Such ironclad precautions were entirely unnecessary as this delegation, which remained a unit until the last, comprised no more than one-fifth of the convention.

The only real struggle that threatened to break loose on the floor of the convention was carefully choked by the Russian mass vote. This was over the adoption of a Manifesto and Program that was to give the Communist Party official expression. On Friday night [Sept. 5, 1919], after many days delay, the Committee on Manifesto attempted to introduce its work to an impatient convention. The first move of the committee was the reading, by Louis C. Fraina, of the Program taken from the majority report. The minority of the committee, Comrades Batt and [Harry] Wicks, announced that the minority report was ready to be considered as a whole, pointing out that the Program was an integral part of the Manifesto and could not be considered intelligently apart from the same. The chairman ruled that this would be the procedure, an appeal was made against the decision, but in the division the

chair was sustained. After reading several clauses Fraina asked to be allowed to withdraw the Majority Program, as it had been decided to consider Manifestos as a whole.

Saturday's session [Sept. 6, 1919] saw the fight continued. The minority was dexterously shut off by a motion made after the reading of both Manifestos, "to take up the majority report as a basis for discussion and adoption." This motion carried, the division being 72 for and 22 against.

At this point it was decided to elect party officials before continuing the discussion on manifesto written by Fraina. For International Secretary, Louis C. Fraina was elected with I.E. Ferguson as alternate. For International Delegates the following were elected: Comrades Ruthenberg, [Nicholas] Hourwich, Ferguson, [Alexander] Stoklitsky; alternates, Comrades [Daniel] Elbaum, [Alex] Bittelman, Ballam, and Lovestone. Central Executive elected as follows: Comrades Ballam, [John] Schwartz, Bittelman, Hourwich, Elbaum, [Oscar] Tyverovsky, Cohen, Ruthenberg, Wicks, Dirba, [K.B.] Karosas, Ferguson, Lovestone, Fraina, [Paul] Petras. For National Secretary, Batt, Renner, [S.A.] Kopnagel, and Ruthenberg were nominated. Batt and Renner declined nominations and Ruthenberg was elected. For National Editor, Batt and Fraina were nominated. Batt declined and Fraina was elected.

Upon the adoption of the majority Manifesto as a whole, a statement was read from 22 delegates, including an alternate and fraternal delegate, as follows:

We, the undersigned delegates, herewith publicly state our disapproval of the Manifesto and Program adopted by the convention and of the methods used in forcing its adoption. Therefore, we ask to be recorded in the minutes as not voting, either affirmatively or negatively, on the adoption of said Manifesto and Program, and as not accepting nominations for, or voting on any particular official elected by this convention.

(signed) Batt, [John] Keracher, Danta, Elzinga, [Oliver] Carlson, [Oakley] Johnson, Shuman, Till, Komarowski, Leslie, [A.J.] McGregor, Krispenz, Ball, Renner, Early, Anderson, Talbot, [George] Breitmeyer, O'Brien, Eastman, Tamarkin, and Wicks.

Although the method of shutting off consideration of the manifesto submitted by the Michigan delegation left no room for it to be adopted, still under the rules of the convention previously adopted, it was possible for Comrade Batt, reporting for the minority of the committee, to make an able defense of the prin-

ciples embodied in that document and to score the crude and contradictory manifesto submitted by Fraina. Batt used up his allotted time and had same extended, his speech being one of the outstanding features of the convention.

Before the close of the convention, strenuous efforts were made by the caucus leaders to induce the Michigan delegates to accept places on the Central Executive Committee and Comrade Ferguson pleaded on the floor for changes in that committee to make it more representative of the elements that made up the convention. Resignations from the committee were affected and although Comrades Dirba of Minnesota, and Wicks, of Chicago, accepted, the Michigan and other delegates adhered to their position.

The chief point of disagreement between those who supported the program adopted and those who opposed it is the question of political action and the attitude towards the state. The opponents of the minority group contended that parliamentary action is the limit of that group's conception of POLITICAL ACTION and that the group have no real backing, etc.

The comrades of Michigan, who have upheld **revolutionary political action** in their State Conventions over a period of years, regard parliamentary action as but a phase of POLITICAL ACTION, but an important one in countries with a form of government like the United States. Another phase of Political Action is the organized might of the workers directed by

industrial groups or otherwise against the POLITICAL SUPREMACY of the capitalist class. To arouse the workers to a conscious understanding of their CLASS position and the use of revolutionary political action is the correct function of the Communist Party at this time. The trouble with the dominant elements within our ranks, themselves until recently bourgeois parliamentary actionists, is that they have reverted consciously or unconsciously to the syndicalist position. The only thing that has saved the Party from the absolute anti-political position is its thin mask of parliamentary action.

Another "crime" charged against the Michigan comrades is their failure to endorse the Left Wing Manifesto, with its crude mass-action verbosity and still cruder adherents. Elements absolutely incapable of unified action in any given direction for any length of time — Larkin, Reed, [Eadmonn] MacAlpine, Fraina, Ferguson & Co. — were no strangers to us; we have seen and heard them in action before. Although birds of a feather, they did not stick together long and are now in different parties.

Many good points have been incorporated into the Party Constitution which tend to promote unified action and discipline. Education of the membership through class methods is an excellent feature if carried out systematically and with the classic works of Marx and Engels as textbooks.

The future of the Communist Party depends upon the understanding of its present membership.

Edited by Tim Davenport.

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